



**Mentally Preparing  
for Life's Transitions**

**AKA: The Psychology of Transition**

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**It has become cliché**

**“The only thing  
constant in life is  
change.”**

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**Self Preservation Instincts**

- Denial vs. Adaptation
- A balancing act. We use a lot of energy for both, and sometimes we use more energy to stay on one side of the continuum.
- Common belief: “we resist change”

Denial ←————→ Adaptation

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## Definition of Change:

- to make the form, nature, content, future course, etc., of (something) different from what it is (or from what it would be if left alone)
- to transform or convert

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## Transition on the other hand...

- Letting go of that piece of ourselves that we have to give up when and because the situation has changed.  
- William Bridges – The Way of Transition
- This is actually what we resist because it is so deeply significant and personal.

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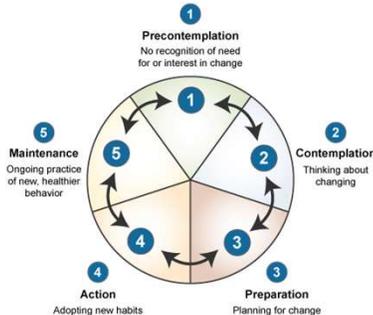
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## Psychological Stages of Change



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### Stage 1 - Precontemplation

- “Not ready” or avoidance - The change is not on the person’s radar screen yet.
  - Not speaking circumstantially here, we’re speaking psychologically
- If approached about a possible change, the person will typically (unconsciously) underestimate the pros and overestimate the cons with little to no actual information

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### Stage 2 - Contemplation

- “Getting Ready” or overcoming ambivalence
- On the radar screen, starting to gather information
- Pros and cons are about equal as they are weighed
- Ambivalence can lead to long delays of months or years before taking action

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### Stage 3 - Preparation

- “Ready”
- Begin with small steps
- Support from friends, family and colleagues is key
- Biggest concerns are usually if they take this action, will there be the payoff expected? Will it work out as hoped? What will happen?

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### Stage 4 - Action

- “All in”
- Change is made, new behavior underway
- This can be a very motivated time, new experiences, new ways of reacting or interacting...often excitement of a new chapter

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### Stage 5 - Maintenance

- “New Way of Life”
- Change is well established
- Old ways seem distant
- One may even question, “Why did it take me so long to come to this decision (action) (change)?”

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### If only it were that simple...

- There are several compounding factors that influence a person’s readiness to change and to progress through the 5 stages of change.
- These factors are the three largest factors for our talk today and yet remain mostly, if not completely, unacknowledged

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## ELEPHANT in the Room #1



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## Ego (False Self)

- Psychological vice that masquerades as virtue for many professionals: the unmitigated identification of self with occupation, accomplishment and professional satisfaction. - WSJ
- One of the biggest fears for holders of respected positions is the potential loss of public esteem.

So WHY is it so difficult to let that go?...

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14

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## Adding to that Egoic False Self

- Legal profession adds new layers and dimensions – we are largely unaware of
  - Zealous advocacy;
  - Always the helper;
  - Confidentiality;
  - Isolated; Workload
  - Tomorrow never comes; prioritizing false self goals over true interests that do not serve a professional or reputational purpose
  - Success

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15

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## ELEPHANT in the Room #2



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16

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## Anxiety

- Venture into the unknown = uncertainty
- Instinctual drive to stay safe, self preserving – moving past those boundaries, by definition, creates anxiety
- Therefore, all change, big or small, is also accompanied by some form of anxiety
  - Might be insignificant or debilitating, but it is there



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17

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## Anxiety continued...

- Behaviors include:
  - Overthinking - identifying and planning for every possible contingency (A, B, C, and D) (then A1/A2, B1/B2, etc)
    - We invariably miss something anyway
  - Difficult to “trust the unfolding process”
  - Believe it is “all up to me” to create a result
  - Quite sure “other shoe will drop”
  - Catastrophising - forgetting to look back and see things that have worked out in the past
  - Lots of self-doubt and second guessing

Can look like good lawyering!

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18

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## Common Example

- Staying in an unsatisfying job (practice area or practice setting) due to security fears (“Devil you know...”)
  - “Fear” of financial insecurity vs financially secure reality (leaving big firm example)
- Missed opportunities (not work related)

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19

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## ELEPHANT in the Room #3



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## Grief



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## 5 Stages of Grief

- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

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22



## Let's talk about grief

- All change, no matter how big or small, whether we label it "good" or "bad" is accompanied by some form of grief
  - Might be insignificant or debilitating, but it is there

Insignificant ←————→ Debilitating

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23



## Grief continued...Stories

- Which vacuum to keep?
- Why can't I let myself sell this house?
- Switching practices – leaving in-house
- The Veterinarian's Observation

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## Resources

- Cultural mores about any form of grief today (excerpt from Joan Didion's book)
- The Grief Club by Melody Beattie
- The Way of Transition by William Bridges (one of many books)

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## Notice any correlations?

Stages of Grief/Traits of Anxiety	↔	Stages of Change
• Denial	↔	• Pre-contemplation
• Anger/Angst	↔	• Contemplation
• Bargaining/Planning		• Preparation
• Depression		• Action
• Acceptance	↔	• Maintenance

Not always an exact correlation, but you can see the similarities and convergences of processes – how grief or anxiety can influence moving through stages of change.

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## Now put it all together:

- Unconscious over identification with job
- Anxiety that comes with change
- Unspoken, unrecognized grief that comes with change
  - That we're culturally not allowed to recognize or speak of
- All reinforcing denial stage (pre-contemplation)

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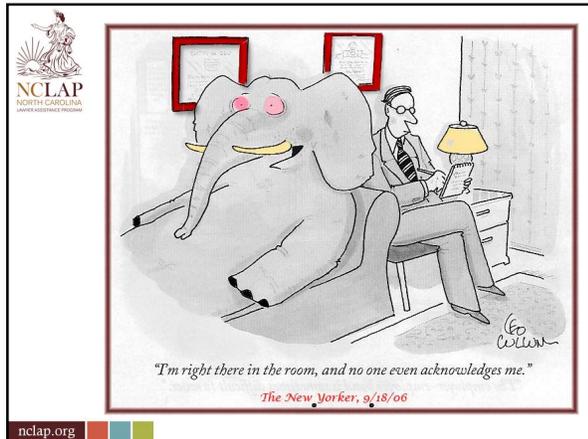
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### No Wonder...

- It is no wonder phasing out of law practice can be so difficult for us.
- Now that we know some of what is at play, what are some practical steps we can take to prepare?

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### Begin Simple Self-Reflection

- Look back on your own life.
  - Jot down 5 major changes or transitions you have been through in your life personally. Some common examples:
    - Going to undergrad or law school
    - Getting married or divorced
    - Having children (each child counts as an event)
    - Starting a job, leaving a job, switching practices
    - Moving to a new city

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## What can you identify?

**Stages of Grief**

- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

**Stages of Change**

- Precontemplation
- Contemplation
- Preparation
- Action
- Maintenance

**Fears/Anxieties**

- Overplanning
- Dreading
- Trying to control process or participants
- Being stuck due to uncertainty about change

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## Predictor

- We tend to be creatures of habit and conditioned emotional response
- We usually have a standard repertoire of emotional responses
  - Knowing how we dealt with something in the past will help us anticipate it in the future so that we can prepare adaptive strategies
- Looking at big picture trends that stand out

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## Assess Yourself

**Job**

Not identified ←————→ Totally identified

**Anxiety**

Insignificant ←————→ Debilitating

**Grief**

Insignificant ←————→ Debilitating

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## Looking Ahead – Proven Strategies

- When dealing with the emotional and psychological transition of retirement, identify for yourself:
  - Where do you currently overly identify with your job/role?
- Strategy for dis-identifying – true example
- Analogous “work” – i.e., serving on boards (two most recent foundation presidents) (Projects of passion, Rotary, tutoring, taxes, mentoring) that still gives us the ego-perks

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## Looking Ahead – Proven Strategies

- When dealing with the emotional and psychological transition of retirement, identify for yourself:
  - What outside interests have you maintained?
  - What outside interests can you start fostering now?

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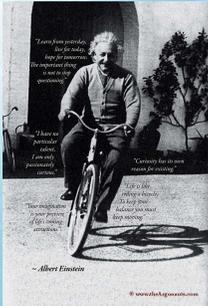
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## A Smart Guy Said It

“Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance you must keep moving.”

~ Albert Einstein,  
letter to his son Eduard, 1930



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**Thank you!**

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